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Letter from Taizé

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Romanesque Nativity from Catalonia

Jesus, son of the Virgin Mary, at Christmas you offer us the joyful message of your Gospel. All who listen, all who welcome the gifts of the Holy Spirit, by day as well as in the vigils of the night, discover that with very little faith, with almost nothing, they have everything.

Prayer by Brother Roger of Taizé

YOUNG ADULT EUROPEAN MEETING IN BARCELONA



A Visible Image of Communion and Trust

L'ajuda em vindrà del Senyor ("My help comes from the Lord"): these words in Catalan from Psalm 121 are from one of the new songs written in preparation for the European meeting this year; it was sung a lot in Taizé this past summer. Now it is ringing out in the parishes in the region of Barcelona as well as in many other European countries.

In Barcelona, every day at the end of the afternoon, those who walk by one of the churches in the centre of town can hear this song through the half-open front door. If they enter the church, they will find several Taizé brothers who pray there each day with young people,

before leaving for one of the many meetings that take place daily in different parishes.

More than 300 parishes are getting ready to welcome the young participants from Europe and other continents, looking for families who will open their

doors to offer them hospitality. In the parishes, too, people are beginning to set up the program for the mornings of the meeting: times of sharing and visits to people who, by their commitment, are witnesses to a hope. About ten Taizé

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Pope John XXIII and Taizé

Now that Pope John XXIII is being beatified in Rome, I cannot forget the moment I learned of his death in 1963. My brothers and I were on our way to evening prayer. And from the depths of my being this question arose: what would become of Taizé without John XXIII?

During his visit to Taizé on October 5, 1986, Pope John Paul II recalled the love his predecessor had for our community with words that inspired our gratitude: "I would like to express to you my affection and my trust with these simple words with which Pope John XXIII, who loved you so much, greeted Brother Roger one day: 'Ah, Taizé, that little springtime!'" And John Paul commented: "My desire is that the Lord may keep you like a springtime that blossoms and that He keep you little, in the joy of the Gospel and the transparency of brotherly love."

It was Cardinal Gerlier of Lyons who took the initiative in 1958 to introduce us to John XXIII, immediately after his election as pope. Wishing to place in his heart the question of the reconciliation of Christians, the cardinal asked John XXIII to receive Taizé at one of his first audiences. Why so quickly? The Pope was elderly, the cardinal explained, and very soon he would hear a great many words, so it was important that he should remember well what we would tell him.

John XXIII accepted "provided that they don't ask questions that are too difficult." And so he received us immediately after the inauguration of his ministry, on the first morning when private audiences were held. He was very attentive to the question of reconciliation and ended the conversation by asking us to return. From the very first meeting, the Pope transmitted to us a kind of unexpected surge of life.

At the beginning of 1959, John XXIII announced a Council "where history would not be put on trial." He had the intuition that this kind of Council could open ways of reconciliation between Christians. We were filled with gratefulness when we realized that he wanted us to be present at the Council as observers. I can still remember the day when the letter arrived: what a gift from God to be invited to take part in that adventure!

The Second Vatican Council began in 1962. In clear terms, John XXIII was able to find expressions that encouraged people to go forward, without losing any time listening to prophets of doom. The day the Council opened he said, "In the current situation of society, the only thing these prophets of doom see is ruin and calamity; they say that things have become much worse in our day, as if everything were perfect before; they announce catastrophes, as if the world were close to its end."

Another thing he said that same day is astonishing because of its intuitive power and remains relevant today: "The Church prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than to wield the weapons of severity."

One day, in a private audience, the Pope confided to us how he sometimes took decisions while praying. "I speak with God," he said. There was a moment of silence: "Oh! Quite humbly, quite simply." Then he said that in that case he would sometimes receive a word but it could happen that, when he tried to communicate it to others, it remained stuck in his throat! And yet that word would come out in the end.

After a meeting we had with the Pope on October 13, 1962, we learned that he had said about us, "We did not negotiate; we spoke together. We did not argue; we loved each other."

Our last meeting took place on February 25, 1963. There were three of us—I was with my brothers Max and Alain. In the throes of an advanced stage of cancer, at the age of 82, the Holy Father knew his death was approaching and we had been warned of this. We were told that our audience would be fixed for a day when John XXIII was not in pain, a day when he would be rested and we would be his only visitors. That audience lasted an unusually long time. Aware that we would never see him again, we wanted to hear a kind of spiritual testament from his lips. John XXIII was concerned that we not be worried about the future of our community. Making circular gestures with his hands, he emphasized: "The Catholic Church is made up of concentric circles that are larger and larger, always larger."

In that last conversation, John XXIII spoke to us of world peace. In utter sim-

licity of heart, he was astonished to see his efforts taken seriously by world leaders. At a time when Russians and Americans were deeply in conflict over Cuba, he was surprised that his call for peace had been listened to and that after his intervention the situation had cooled down.

The Pope was just about to publish a letter on peace: *Pacem in Terris*. He told us how the idea had come to him on the night of Epiphany. In that letter, the Pope emphasized the insufficiency of the way the world was organized for the good "of the entire human family." He suggested the creation of "a public authority of worldwide scope which would exercise its action across the entire earth, an authority with universal jurisdiction, a supranational or world authority."

John XXIII knew how to look beyond immediate situations. He did not let threats that the worst would happen affect him. During our last meeting with him, we saw tears in his eyes because, he told us, some of his intentions had been disfigured. That was his most difficult trial.

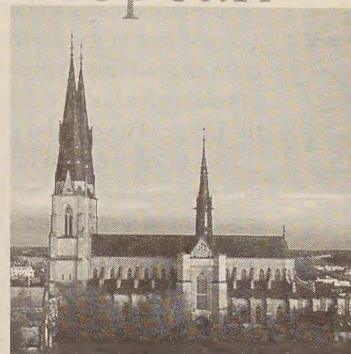
Still today, I sometimes re-read some of John XXIII's words. I like to remember this one: "Self-love paralyzes the development of the spirit and causes sadness." He was so convinced of this that he spoke of the importance of "placing oneself beneath one's own feet." When a trial arrived, he said simply, "I am like a bird singing in a thorn bush."

After the Pope's death, we welcomed to Taizé on two occasions his youngest brother, Giuseppe Roncalli, with some members of his family. That elderly man observed everything attentively. He noticed among other things how rudimentary the accommodation was for young people on our hill. One evening he said to his grandson, "It was my brother the Pope who began what will come out of Taizé." That peasant from Bergamo had realized to what extent we loved his brother and that the love was mutual.

Brother Roger of Taizé

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The Tablet 3 September 2000.

Northern-European Meeting in Uppsala



brothers, a few sisters of Saint Andrew and some twenty young volunteers from different countries have gone to Barcelona to work with the groups of parishes for several months.

It is already clear that what will touch the participants most will be the warmth of Mediterranean hospitality. Many families are deeply desirous to share their life and to open themselves to the experience of people from other countries. Preparing a meeting like this is also an opportunity to contact those who are not active in the life of the Church. People are looking for ways of going out towards others, particularly through neighbourhood groups and the many associations that try to live in solidarity with those who are nearby or far-away.

People are preparing for the meeting in Barcelona in the different countries of Europe as well. Throughout Germany, for example, a hundred prayer vigils and meetings, called "nights of light," are being held in November. In Poland, those coming to Barcelona are meeting around more than 200 preparation points, ten of which are being organized by Protestant or Orthodox groups.

Many young adults are looking forward to this trip to Barcelona, as a way of living out together a visible image of communion and trust. In this way they hope to make visible that reality of reconciliation which is at the heart of the Church. "It is hard for us to stop, to take the time to pray. Our days are too filled with work, study, helping in a parish group," said one young man during a preparation meeting. "My expectation for the prayers during the European meeting is that they might help me to find myself and to deepen my faith through contact with others of my age."

This Letter went to press before the meeting in Uppsala, which brought together young adults not just from Sweden and Norway, but also from Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Russia. Several Taizé brothers and young volunteers spent two months in Uppsala to prepare the meeting with the parishes of the city. They also made visits to other young people throughout Sweden and in neighbouring countries.

Each day during the meeting, prayers were held in the cathedral, which is the largest church in Sweden. One young man said, "In the European meetings it is great to pray in large halls and tents. But we are happy to pray in the cathedral during this meeting here; in this way it becomes a bit more our home."

One of the topics of reflection during the meeting is the question of solidarity. Swedish society is organized in such a way that the handicapped, the elderly and the ill receive much support. People are aware, however, that it is not enough to "organize charity," but that it is essential to keep compassion and personal initiatives alive. For this reason, some students asked the church social-service centre how they could contribute volunteer help, for instance by visiting elderly people. Others are looking for a form of mutual assistance, where each person can feel useful. Some have offered to help by keeping a church in the centre of town open on Friday evenings until late at night, in order to offer a space of silence and welcome at a time of day when many young people are outdoors.

During a preparatory meeting with representatives from different parishes, members of very different churches became acquainted and realized that they could already work together: there were young Lutherans, Baptists and other free churches. In the Catholic church different national groups—Croats, Poles, Arabs—see the meeting as an opportunity to deepen their fellowship. This great diversity is also a challenge: what lies at the heart of our faith and is capable of bringing us together?

The archbishop of Uppsala, who is president of the Swedish Lutheran bishops' conference, wrote a message of invitation which included these words:

"The Taizé Community is a very important meeting-place for young and old throughout the world, a place where you can find peace and leave behind you a demanding and stressful daily life. Prayer, service and sharing characterise life in Taizé. For many, it is a place to return to regularly.

"I am very happy that the brothers of Taizé, in collaboration with the Uppsala Council of Churches, are inviting young adults to a meeting in Sweden. We thus have the possibility of encountering a community characterised by openness and trust. In a life where stress, insecurity and lack of confidence in the future occupy much room in our thoughts, the brothers of Taizé can help us during this meeting by allowing us to see other dimensions of life. The young people of our whole country are welcome. May each of us contribute, in his or her own way, to the success of this meeting!"

**YOUNG ADULT
EUROPEAN
MEETING**

28 December - 1 January

Taizé
2000/2001

Barcelona

The image of a vindictive God, ready to strike in order to punish the least infraction of his rigid decrees, that some people think they find in the Hebrew Scriptures, is without a doubt one of the greatest obstacles to faith. What is the truth behind this impression? If God is Love, and all God can do is give his love, why do we seem to find in the Bible the image of a god who punishes?

First of all, we need to remember that the biblical revelation does not come down from heaven ready-made. Following a "law of incarnation", human beings are required to find in the most varied areas of their life on this earth words and images to express that unique Reality we call God. These images help us to approach the Mystery beyond words by describing some of its characteristics. But at the same time we are aware that God is inevitably beyond anything we can imagine (cf. Is 55,8-9; 1 Cor 2,9). It is only by examining the relationship between the different images, situating them in an ongoing history, and relating them to the heart of the message that we can grasp their true significance.

In addition, most of us read the Bible in translation. And the work of a translator is not easy! The biblical vocabulary is multifaceted and the cultural distance between us and the text is great. It can happen that, in order to avoid long paraphrases, translators choose a word that hardens or simplifies the reality expressed by the text. Sometimes they may even unconsciously project on the text their own understanding of God and his ways. These facts set a clear limit to any "literal" or word-for-word interpretation of the Bible.

In the Hebrew Bible, our "Old Testament", we encounter the notion of punishment mainly in two areas. The first complex of words is pedagogic in nature. It is rooted principally in wisdom literature, those books that attempt to show how people should live in order to find true happiness. Parents, teachers and people with experience ("the wise") are responsible for helping not just the bodies of children and pupils to grow, but especially their minds. It is up to them to set limits to the behaviour of children, help them to acquire a sense of responsibility and understand the practical consequences of the choices they make. This activity of parents and teachers is always described as a proof of their love (e.g. Prov 13,24; 19,18; 29,17) and, even if educational methods have changed, it is just as important today as ever. But in our day, instead of verbs such as "chastise" or "discipline", we would use words like "educate", "train" or "develop" to express this activity.

At times, the books of the Bible use the same image to try and explain God's intentions (e.g. Prov 3,11-12; cf. Heb 12,5-13). If God has created a universe where everything is not always easy, that is not at all because he does not love us or takes malicious pleasure in seeing us suffer. When things are not easy for us, that can be an opportunity to discover the true meaning of our life here on earth. When we encounter a resistance, we no longer confuse reality with our self-centred fantasies; we learn to take other people into account and to discover the true significance of events.

By describing difficult experiences as a way by which God "disciplines" us, the biblical writer wants to proclaim, paradoxically, some good news! He wants us to realize that even in these situations God is not absent.

God is simply treating us as if we were his own sons and daughters (Heb 12,7)! If God is present in these experiences, that means he can use realities seemingly alien to him in order to help us head towards a better life. God's intention is not to hurt us but, in his company, even misfortune can serve the cause of life. "You intended to harm me, but God intended to bring good out of it" (Gen 50,20). Far from being a sign that God has rejected or abandoned us, trials are here viewed as part of a pilgrimage to true happiness, by keeping us from settling down comfortably in a narrow, restricted life. In this sense, they keep the road open towards an ever wider communion.

Another expression sometimes translated by "punish" is found especially in the prophetic books and in the psalms. Its principal meaning seems to be something like "to show concern for someone by going toward that person, by entering into the concrete conditions of his or her existence." The most global translation would be "to visit". In general, the word refers to a positive event. So, for example, God "visited" his people to save them (Ex 3,16); he "visited" Hannah and she gave birth to a son (1 Sam 2,21); he will "visit" the faithful to bring them happiness (Jer 29,10; cf. Zeph 2,7). In these texts, the Hebrew word is sometimes translated by the expressions "to care for, to watch over".

Elsewhere, the very same verb can take on a negative connotation. The unfaithful leaders of the nation will stumble when God "visits" them (Jer 6,15). God will "visit" the sins of his people (Amos 3,2; Ex 20,5), of other nations (Ps 59,5), or even of all the dwellers on earth (Is 26,21) upon them, causing them in this way to experience the consequences of the evil they have done. In this case, the translators often use the verb "to punish", but it is important to realize that it is not God's basic intention which has changed, but rather human behaviour. Those whose existence is characterised by trust in God will experience the divine intervention as a response to their deepest desires, whereas for those who are frozen in a closed attitude of refusal and arrogance, this "visit" will reveal the emptiness of their pretensions. What the former will experience as a fire that warms and illuminates will be for the latter a blaze that will reduce to smoke and ashes choices that lead nowhere (Mal 4,1-2).

Once again, God's visit is in itself something positive. The New Testament provides us with a definitive confirmation of this, because God's visit is in the final analysis the presence of his Son, Jesus Christ, come "not to condemn but to save" (John 3,17); in Jesus, God "visits and redeems his people" (Luke 1,68; cf. 1,78). When one day Jesus brought back to life a widow's dead son, people cried out, "God has visited his people!" (Luke 7,16). But even Christ's coming is not good news for those who cling to an inauthentic life; they may perceive as a "punishment" what is in fact an invitation to grow, to set out on the road towards a wider communion. If "all God can do is give his love", we should nonetheless realize that this love has an unsettling aspect to it, because it opens before us a Life greater than anything we could ever imagine.

JANUARY

MEDITATING ON THE WORD

- 1 Mon** When they had seen the child Jesus in the manger, the shepherds made known what they had been told concerning him and everyone who heard was astonished. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.
Lk 2:16-21
- 2 Tue** The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, a name which means "God-with-us".
Mt 1:18-23
- 3 Wed** This is what the Lord wants of you, only this: to act justly, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.
Mt 6:6-8
- 4 Thu** The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.
Jn 1:1-18
- 5 Fri** Of Christ, John writes: The light shines in the darkness, and darkness could not overpower it.
Mt 2:1-12
- 6 Sat** EPIPHANY When they saw the star, the wise men were filled with a great joy. As they entered, they saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they knelt down and worshipped him.
Mt 2:1-12
- 7 SUN** John the Baptist said: I baptise you with water, but one stronger than I is coming and he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
Lk 3:15-22
- 8 Mon** Jesus said of John the Baptist: He is the one of whom scripture says: Look, I am going to send my messenger before you to prepare your way.
Mt 11:2-15
- 9 Tue** God wakens my ear every morning to listen as a disciple.
Is 50:4-9
- 10 Wed** Jesus said: Seek first God's Kingdom, and all other things will be given to you as well.
Lk 12:22-31
- 11 Thu** You are merciful to all, Lord, because you are almighty. You overlook people's sins so that they can repent. Yes, you love everything that exists.
Ws 11:21-26
- 12 Fri** Sing a new song to the Lord! Praise his name! Proclaim God's salvation, day by day. Tell the nations of his glory!
Ps 96
- 13 Sat** Peter said: God sent his word, and announced the good news of peace through Jesus Christ; he is the Lord of all.
Ac 10:34-43
- 14 SUN** There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but it is the same Spirit; there are different ways of serving, but it is the same Lord; there are many forms of activity, but in every-body it is the same God who is at work in them all.
1 Co 12:3-13
- 15 Mon** The Lord is coming to my help. Who then can condemn me?
Is 50:7-9
- 16 Tue** St Paul writes: The Spirit seeks life and peace.
Rm 8:5-11
- 17 Wed** I think of all your deeds, Lord, and stretch out my hands to you; my soul is thirsting for you like a parched land.
Ps 143
- 18 Thu** When Elijah was discouraged, an angel of God touched him and said, "Get up and eat, or the journey will be too long for you." So he got up and ate and drank, and, strengthened by that food, he walked until he reached the mountain of God.
1 K 19:1-8
- 19 Fri** Jesus told those he sent out: Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.
Mt 10:37-42
- 20 Sat** Being in every way like a human being, Christ Jesus was humble yet, and became obedient to death, death on a cross. Therefore God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names.
Ph 2:1-11
- 21 SUN** Jesus read out these words of Isaiah the prophet: The Spirit of the Lord is on me. God has sent me to announce good news to the afflicted, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed.
Lk 4:14-21
- 22 Mon** The Lord says: I am with you, I will watch over you wherever you go. I will not abandon you before accomplishing what I have promised you.
Gn 28:10-22
- 23 Tue** May our Lord Jesus Christ, and God our Father who has given us his love and, through his grace, such ceaseless encouragement and sure hope, encourage and strengthen you in every good word and deed.
2 Th 2:16-3:5
- 24 Wed** The Lord sent me to comfort all who mourn, to clothe them in festive garments instead of despondency.
Is 61:1-4
- 25 Thu** Paul writes: The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.
Ga 2:15-21
- 26 Fri** Just as each of us has one body with many parts, and the parts do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, who are many, form one body, and each of us belongs to all the others.
Rm 12:3-8
- 27 Sat** Let us strive to know the Lord; that he will come is as certain as the dawn. He will come to us like the spring rain upon the earth.
Hos 6:3-6
- 28 SUN** Even if I can understand all mysteries and know all things, even if I have the faith to move mountains, if I am without love I am nothing.
1 Co 13:1-13
- 29 Mon** God is faithful, he will give you strength and protect you from the evil one.
2 Th 3:1-5
- 30 Tue** You, Lord, are our Father and Redeemer. You act for those who trust in you and welcome those who accomplish justice joyfully.
Is 63:16b-64:3-7
- 31 Wed** Paul writes: I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the communion in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.
Ph 3:4-14
- These short readings are those read, day by day, at community prayer in Taizé.
The Bible reference given indicates a slightly longer passage.

These short readings are those read, day by day, at community prayer in Taizé. The Bible reference given indicates a slightly longer passage.

4 SUN Lk 5:1-11 Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch." "Master," Simon replied, "we have worked hard all night long without catching anything, but because you say so I will let down the nets."

5 Mon 2 Co 1:18-22 Christ Jesus was never Yes-and-No; his nature is all Yes. For in him is found the Yes to all God's promises.

6 Tue Col 2:6-13 Live your lives in Christ Jesus. Be rooted and built up in him, strengthened by the faith you have been taught and overflowing with thankfulness.

7 Wed Ps 139 God, and know my heart. Probe me, know my thoughts and guide me in the way that is everlasting.

8 Thu Dt 31:1-8 The Lord your God walks with you. God will never leave you or forsake you.

9 Fri Jn 8:27-29 The people asked Jesus, "What must we do to do God's work?" Jesus replied, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

10 Sat Sl 2:1-9 You who reverence the Lord, wait for his mercy. Do not turn aside from him.

11 SUN Lk 6:20-23 Looking at his disciples, Jesus said: Happy are you who are poor, the kingdom of God is yours.

12 Mon Ps 16 Lord, you teach me the way of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy.

13 Tue Ac 1:6-11 Jesus, risen from the dead, said to his disciples: You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit, and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.

14 Wed Is 32:15-20 Isaiah said: Once again the Lord will breathe upon us, and the wilderness will become an orchard as green as the forest.

15 Thu Ps 27 "Come," my heart says, "seek God's face!" Your face, Lord, do I seek.

16 Fri 2 Co 1:3-7 Praised be God who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

17 Sat Mt 11:28-30 Jesus said: Come to me, you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest.

18 SUN Lk 6:27-38 Jesus said: Give, and it will be given to you. A full measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For the measure you use will be the measure used for you.

19 Mon Jn 6:41-51 Jesus said: No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.

20 Tue Mt 5:13-16 Jesus said to his disciples: You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, what can make it salty again?

21 Wed Ep 5:14-20 Let yourselves be filled by the Spirit. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.

22 Thu Heb 11:8-16 By faith, Abraham answered God's call and set out for the land he was to inherit. And he set out without knowing where he was going.

23 Fri Ps 69:30-37 You who seek God, may your hearts live! For God listens to the poor.

24 Sat 1 P 5:5-7 Clothe yourselves in humility in your relationships with others, for God gives his grace to the humble.

25 SUN Lk 6:39-45 Jesus said: First take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly in order to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

26 Mon Mt 7:7-8 I watch in hope for God who will save me. Though I sit in darkness, the Lord is my light.

27 Tue Ps 37 Make the Lord your joy: God will give you even more than your heart's desire.

28 Wed Mt 6:1-6 ASH WEDNESDAY Jesus said: When you give, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your generosity is secret. And your Father, who sees all that is done in secret, will reward you.

1 Thu Ps 142 I cry out to you, Lord; set me free from prison that I may praise your name.

2 Fri Lk 2:22-32 PRESENTATION OF THE LORD When he saw the child Jesus, Simeon praised God, saying: My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples — a light to enlighten the nations.

3 Sat Ga 5:16-26 Since the Spirit is our life, let our actions be guided by the Spirit.

FEBRUARY

MEDITATING ON THE WORD

"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," Jesus replies to Philip (John 14,9), and Saint Paul explains, "Christ is the image (icon) of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col 1,15). Jesus is the icon of God. The visible humanity of Christ is the image of his invisible divinity. From the wedding at Cana until after his resurrection, the disciples saw God's glory shine out through the person of Jesus—in his words, his acts and in the gift of his life.

The evangelist John gives his testimony: "We saw the glory that he has from his Father as the one and only Son, full of grace and truth" (John 1,14). Because he is the Son, Jesus receives everything from God and gives himself fully to God. By making the Father's will the basis of his life, he allows God's glory to shine forth. And so the disciples discovered that a human face and body could be a reflection of God and of God's love.

At the key moment of Christ's death on the cross, his body and blood, because they were given to the very end, expressed the victory of giving over death. In paradoxical fashion, the flesh and blood of Jesus communicated the beauty and the power of giving. And so John can explain that in Jesus "the Word became flesh" (John 1,14). Therefore all flesh, every existence, can in turn express and communicate beauty, giving, God.

How can I let Christ live within me? In the communion of the Church, Christ draws me out of my isolation and allows me to discover my true identity. Christ prayed for his disciples in this way: "I have given them the glory that you gave to me, so that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to complete unity so that the world may realize that you sent me" (John 17,22). Together we are called to be, each in their own way, a reflection of his face for others (cf. 2 Cor 3,18).

- What aspects of God does Christ communicate for me?
- How do I respond to the call to be, with others, a reflection of Christ?

"I tell you the truth, unless a person is born of water and the Spirit, they cannot enter the Kingdom of God," Jesus replied to Nicodemus when he asked him how an old man could be born again (John 3,5). In birth we encounter the original mystery of a person. It is the touchstone of every existence, where life is revealed as a gift and as a call. Being born is an event which I am absolutely unable to decide for myself. My will has nothing to do with it. Other people have taken the initiative; they transmit life, but are not in charge of it. The only way we can enter the world is by letting others welcome us.

Nicodemus is an important man, pious and prudent, who is beginning to recognize who Jesus is. Jesus tells him in no uncertain terms, "To see God's Kingdom, you have to be born from above" (John 3,3). He explains what is at stake in all its radicalness: if God is communion, in order to know God we have to let God welcome us and bring us into that communion; we cannot remain outside observers. Jesus himself, by asking John to baptise him, made the radical choice to be in communion with the whole people, and in that way communion with the Father in the Spirit was manifested in a tangible way (Matt 3,13-17).

"Being born of water" is an invitation to be cleansed once and for all and unburdened of the weight of one's sins. The day before he died, by taking water to wash his disciples' feet (John 13), Jesus provided a sign that the gift of his life to the very end is the definitive and efficacious purification. The final birth expressed by baptism is to be born to eternal life.

"Being born of the Spirit" means letting ourselves be placed in the world of the Spirit by the one who calls us to welcome his life as the Risen Lord. In this way he offers us his own breath of life, the power of love that enables someone to give their life to the very end.

- Can I dare to believe that it is through a "new birth" that I enter the realities of God?
- What does that change for me?

Johannine hours are meant as a way of seeking God in silence and prayer in the midst of our daily life. During the course of a day, take an hour or so to read the Bible passage with the short commentary and to reflect on the questions which follow. Afterwards, a group of 3 to 10 people can meet to share what they have discovered and perhaps for a time of prayer.

Pakistan

Where there is love,
God is present

Even in a difficult time for Pakistan, young people are enthusiastically preparing the pilgrimage of trust that will take place in Lahore from November 9-12, with the presence of a Taizé brother. The theological institute that will welcome participants from throughout the country is built in the middle of the village of Sadhoke, in the midst of the fields, with no dividing wall. Father Asi, who is in charge of the centre, explains why: "We did not want any wall in order not to harm the openness and the beauty of the place. In this way we live without fear. It is an ideal place for silence and meditation." To prepare the meeting, a Taizé brother visited young people in several cities of the Punjab region. "We often sang, shared and prayed together," he wrote. "I was very eager to encourage them on their faith journey, but they are the ones who gave me a lot. One question kept coming up: How can we grow in the love of God in order to love those around us, even those who

hurt us? That is how we found the theme for the meeting: *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est* (Where charity and love are found, God is present)." One of the young Pakistanis proposed this theme after spending two months in Bangladesh: "I constantly met people who talked to me about the war for independence in 1971 and of the hatred between our two peoples. How can I speak of peace unless I begin with myself? So I am trying to begin." Before this meeting there were two weekends that brought together young Pakistanis, some of whom had spent time in Taizé.

Rwanda

Healing Hearts to Build
and Consolidate Peace

Magali and Marie, two French girls, spent four weeks of their holidays visiting different communities and youth groups in Rwanda. They agreed with an intuition of a writer from the Ivory Coast, Veronique Tadío: "What happened there concerns us all. It is not just the business

of a people lost in the darkest heart of Africa."

Magali – When our aeroplane landed in Kigali, we were happy but also impatient to discover Rwanda. We remembered all the violence that has wounded that land and the region of the great lakes. The consequences of the war, of the genocide, of hunger, of illness, are still daily struggles for the inhabitants. One question preoccupied us: how can people go on living in spite of suffering and when peace is so fragile?

I was immediately struck by the beauty of the landscape in that "land of a thousand hills" and a thousand colours. At the end of August, it had not rained for several months and yet there were pretty flowers. Was that not a symbol of what we would discover: an incredible hope in spite of all the difficulties?

Marie – What struck me at first, during our meetings with our Rwandan friends, was their great desire to show us hospitality, to get to know us. At the end of every meeting, they would ask us to stay a bit longer, telling us that we should meet again soon, that they had many more things to tell us and ques-

tions to ask us. We sensed an immense need in them to share and talk about their life and their country.

Among the young people we met, none were spared the sufferings of war, exile and genocide. Every family in Rwanda has been deeply wounded. Some have miraculously survived. They lost most of their relatives, who were sometimes even killed before their eyes. Some became heads of families at the age of 14 or 15. Some have parents who have been in overcrowded prisons for six years waiting for a verdict. Still others were born and have lived their childhood in exile, as "foreigners" in refugee camps, insecure and uncertain about their future. All have grown up in mistrust.

Poverty is another difficulty. How to find food? Many young people ask themselves that question. Often they have to stop their studies to find a small job to support their families: for instance going early in the morning to buy vegetables from farmers and then climbing the hill to sell them in the city, or selling other small objects. Most of our friends had graduated from high school, sometimes with good marks, but they may never be able to continue the studies they dreamed of because of the lack of places or money.

Another thing the young suffer from is the drama of AIDS. Every day in their neighbourhood they see people die—one of their brothers, a young woman who lives nearby, a mother... No one is spared. In the district of Kimisagara, for example, 35% of the population was HIV-positive before 1994; today the estimate is above 50%.

In spite of all these difficulties, most of the young people we saw told us that they believe firmly in the future of their country because they have the will, the courage and the trust in God. All are deeply aware that true reconciliation is needed in their country. That is the greatest challenge. Rwandans with very different painful histories live side by side; how can they manage to come together truly, to get to know each other and to build trust? How can they break habits of fear that have consciously been kept alive for decades? "When each of us bear within us a wound around which our heart has closed, where can we find someone to be open to this suffering and by listening to it allow it to heal? How can we ourselves be the ear that listens to and tries to understand the suffering of others?" asks Violette, who works in church counselling to form lay persons able to listen to those who have suffered from traumas, often in silence. And she explains, "It is indispensable to be able to understand the suffering of others, to be compassionate—to suffer together—in order to be able to live together."

Magali – We met people whose hearts

are at peace and who work simply and effectively in that ministry. There is no special age in order to be a peacemaker. Each day there were encounters that awakened hope.

There are many orphans, and people find simple ways to welcome those who have lost their families. On the top of Mount Kigali, for example, some young people are living together though everything would seem to make this impossible. They are not of the same ethnic group nor of the same denomination (there are Muslims, Catholics and Protestants); the oldest ones are barely 20. Some saw their parents killed, others know that their parents are in prison, and still they live together. They have planted a small garden, put up tents and begun to raise goats. The older ones work; the younger ones go to school. "We used to live in the street with nothing at all; we were completely down-and-out; we stole to eat. Some of our friends are in prison for that. Little by little we created this group, which has grown a lot. Today there are more than 150 of us living here together in peace. It's not always easy, but we manage. Our next project is to bring water here."

Marie – Christophe is in charge of the Rafiki club, a small cultural and sports center where young people from Nyamirambo, a district of Kigali, meet. When he began, he realized that each team was made up of young people who spoke the same language, came from the same region or the same ethnic group. He also realized that the older ones continued to tell stories that kept mistrust alive. With time and by making use of "chance events," the groups became mixed and now things are very different. He likes his work with youth because, he says, "with them everything is possible, everything can begin again, life overflows."

In the region of Gikongoro a group of young people, that met for prayer and sharing, tried to find ways of helping people in need. They decided to prepare food for the prisoners in their city and bring it to them. The prisons do not give the inmates to eat; family members have to take care of this, and sometimes there is no longer any family or the families are very poor. They found a place near the prison, in a neighbourhood where women live whose husbands were killed during the genocide, and often their children as well, and whose homes were destroyed. When they saw the youth group help prisoners suspected of taking part in the genocide, they told the police to stop them. After having discussed with the group leader and prayed together, the young people went to the women and offered to help them rebuild their homes. The women were hesitant about accepting, but they accepted because they no longer had any

men to do it. The first days they kept away while the young people were working, but finally they approached and began to speak with them and get to know them. In the end, they told the young people they should keep on bringing food to the prisoners.

Magali – People here sing a lot; in the churches there are many choirs. Everyone can express their joy by singing, as well as their suffering, and entrust everything to God. One Saturday, we prayed with some young people for peace in our countries but also for peace in our hearts. We sang and sang, and then there was silence. A peaceful silence which caused Liberata to say, "After the war, after all I saw in this country, I did not think that one day I would ever see Hutus praying with Tutsis, Catholics praying with Protestants, French people praying with me, and yet now I realize that this is what I was dreaming of. So it is possible to live, to pray together in spite of our differences. How beautiful this is; it's already heaven on earth."

Marie – All the young people always asked us how it would be possible to get to know each other better, to share about our lives, to share with the youth of Europe. Because of their trust they can give us a lot. These meetings were a very important expression of faith. I discovered that God is present at the heart of the wound, in the midst of what is most terrible. There are many stories about people who, during the genocide, risked or gave their lives to save others.

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